



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2017

Religious diversity in the Egyptian desert: new findings from the Dakhleh Oasis

Brand, Mattias

Abstract: New archaeological and papyrological discoveries in the Egyptian desert are destined to impact the study of religion in late antiquity. This extended review of *An Oasis City* (2015) will highlight some of most important findings related to the religious diversity of the region. The tremendous wealth of the new discoveries offers insight into the development of religion during the later Roman Empire. Building on this archaeological overview of Amheida (ancient Trimithis in the Dakhleh Oasis), this paper discusses the local situation of Egyptian religion, Christianity, and Manichaeism in late antiquity, with a particular focus on religious diversity and interaction in everyday life.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.v4.2017.17-39>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-181569>

Journal Article

Published Version



The following work is licensed under a Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) License.

Originally published at:

Brand, Mattias (2017). Religious diversity in the Egyptian desert: new findings from the Dakhleh Oasis. *Entangled Religions*, 4:17-39.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.v4.2017.17-39>

Religious Diversity in the Egyptian Desert New Findings from the Dakhleh Oasis

MATTIAS BRAND

Centre for the Study of Religion, Leiden University, The Netherlands



License:

This contribution to *Entangled Religions* is published under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International\)](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). The license can be accessed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or is available from Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbot Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

© 2017 Mattias Brand

Entangled Religions 4 (2017)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.13154/er.v4.2017.17-39>

Religious Diversity in the Egyptian Desert

New Findings from the Dakhleh Oasis

MATTIAS BRAND

Leiden University, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT *New archaeological and papyrological discoveries in the Egyptian desert are destined to impact the study of religion in late antiquity. This extended review of An Oasis City (2015) will highlight some of most important findings related to the religious diversity of the region. The tremendous wealth of the new discoveries offers insight into the development of religion during the later Roman Empire. Building on this archaeological overview of Amheida (ancient Trimithis in the Dakhleh Oasis), this paper discusses the local situation of Egyptian religion, Christianity, and Manichaeism in late antiquity, with a particular focus on religious diversity and interaction in everyday life.*

KEY WORDS Trimithis; Christianity; Manichaeism; Dakhleh Oasis; history of religion

In the early nineteenth century, the British explorer Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, widely considered as the father of British Egyptology, travelled through the Dakhleh Oasis and he despised it. He wrote to his friend Robert Hay that “for of all places on earth I do think the oases the most miserable. People used to talk of fortunate & blessed islands & other similar nonsense – it was a pity that they were not forced to live there. The people of the wadis are the most stupid beings on earth full of religious prejudice – a sure sign of ignorance. You lost nothing by not going to this little oasis.” (cited in Thompson 1992, 64). Six years earlier, another British explorer, Sir Archibald Edmonstone, made a similar trip into the Western desert of Egypt and described one of the cities as “now a complete mass of ruins, and we could distinguish nothing but a small remnant of a temple, and the fragment of a white marble statue. This last was apparently of Greek workmanship, and

not without elegance, although so imperfect” (cited in Boozer 2013, 127). In both observers’ opinions, the oasis and its antiquities were imperfect and miserable. The results of recent excavations, however, have proved them wrong. The Dakhleh Oasis offers a tremendous wealth of material for the study of cultural entanglement of the Egyptian-Roman world and its religious diversity. These new finds have become more accessible with the publication of *An Oasis City* (2015), the recent archaeological overview of the excavations of Amheida, ancient Trimithis.

Significant cultural and religious differences characterized the peripheral oasis regions at the border of the Roman province of Egypt. As elsewhere, the local expressions of ancient religious traditions adapted to the specific geographical context and its needs. With the publication of new archaeological and papyrological finds from this region, we get a glimpse of the regional diversity of Egyptian religion, Christianity, and even Manichaeism. Finding all three of these religious traditions in a single village, about 360 km from the Nile valley following desert routes, is exceptional. It is not only valuable for our knowledge of Early Christianities in Egypt, but it also highlights the interaction between various religious traditions and the role of religion in everyday life. As a result, the Dakhleh Oasis deserves a place in our introductions to the religious developments of late antiquity. Scholars of religion, interested in the transition from traditional Greek, Roman, or Egyptian religions to the diverse world(s) of Early Christians have ample reason to turn their attention to the villages and towns of the Egyptian oases. This article will outline some of the religious features of the Dakhleh Oasis during the fourth century as discussed in the recently published volume *An Oasis City*. The back cover of this book promises a lively, accessible and richly illustrated presentation of political, religious, economic and cultural life in Trimithis. Although it has not been written explicitly for students of religion, *An Oasis City* offers enough incentive to

look into the newly discovered archaeological and papyrological evidence for religion and religious interaction on a village level.

Trimithis was one of the few cities of the Dakhleh Oasis, which together with the Kharga Oasis formed the so-called "Great Oasis" in the Western desert of Egypt. The excavations of the past ten years, directed by Roger S. Bagnall, have unearthed a wealth of material from the Roman period: architectural structures like houses, streets, a bathhouse, a school and, most illuminating, a church and the remains of a temple. These relatively recent finds, together with the documents and archaeological material from the excavation of ancient Kellis (modern Ismant el-Kharab in the same oasis) by Colin A. Hope, offer new insights into the history of religion in towns and villages on the fringes of the Roman Empire.

An Oasis City presents Trimithis in all facets of life, with a distinct focus on the Roman period. The first two chapters discuss Trimithis in its surroundings (Chapter 1) and the early history of the city before the Romans (Chapter 2). The remaining five chapters address aspects of city life in Roman times. After a discussion of the urban landscape (Chapter 3), the authors examine Egyptian religion (Chapter 4) and Christianity (Chapter 5), followed by chapters on economy and society (Chapter 6), and culture and education (Chapter 7). None of these chapters was written by a single author, but various sections within the chapters are explicitly attributed to one (or more) of the five co-authors. The specialization of the individual authors is thus embedded in this multi-voiced volume without losing the coherence of the narrative, although a strong difference in style is notable when the archaeological aspects of specific buildings are discussed (Bagnall, as director of the project, is responsible for 9 sections, Davoli for 7, Kaper 6, Aravecchia 3, Cribiore 2 and McFadden 1). Even if the shift in style may strike the reader as odd, it accurately replicates the fragmentary and plural nature of the sources and the multitude of disciplines involved

in reconstructing ancient Trimithis. The following sections will briefly summarize some of the main findings from the oasis relating to Egyptian religion, Christianity, and Manichaeism (including findings not discussed in the volume), before addressing the larger questions of religious diversity and interaction in late antiquity.

Egyptian religion

Little is left of the traditional Egyptian temple at Trimithis. Only ten excavated squares of 10 m² shed some light on the local situation, which is best understood in relation to the other temples of the oasis. The earliest evidence for temple-related activity comes from the 25th dynasty, while a new temple was constructed during the reign of Amasis II (570-526 BCE). Stones from these earlier temples were reused in the Roman period temple for the god Thoth. He was not the only deity venerated during this period, as a large stela from the Ptolemaic or Roman period depicts Seth, an important deity of the neighbouring city of Mut (Greek Mothis). To find Seth at Trimithis is remarkable since he had fallen out of favour in the Nile Valley (p. 50). His cult in at least two oasis cities can thus be taken as an indication of the cultural independence of the inhabitants of the oasis from traditions in the Nile Valley. The Roman period temple of Trimithis stood once on the central hill, but was completely dismantled for reuse in the Ottoman period. Its large sandstone blocks and decorative gypsum have been found at various places in the oasis, for example above one of the doorways in the modern town of El-Qasr. While the excavations have helped to identify the orientation and dimensions of the temple on the hill, the retrieved decorations were more informative about their divine world. Some of these decorative relief fragments, which derive from the

extension of the sanctuary in the time of Titus and Domitian, depict a row of goddesses in Egyptian style presenting gifts to Thoth (p.110, fig. 88).

Apart from the decorations, the discussion of the temple cult is brief and rather unsatisfactory for those interested in local religious practice. Kaper notes that some of the external walls still show traces of visitors' gouges "for healing or other magical purposes" (p. 109) but he does not engage more deeply in the practices of these visitors, presumably because of the sparseness of the temple's remains. The temple of Tutu at Kellis has, in this respect, more successfully survived the test of time. The excavations, for example, revealed a birth chamber of the god (*mammisi*) with splendid fresco decorations depicting hundreds of local (and often previously unknown) deities (not included in the volume under review). Kaper's work on the Kellis temple can thus be used to sketch some of the Egyptian religious practices during the Roman period. A striking example is the relation between religion in the temple sphere and the domestic realm, as a similar oily substance was found on temple statues and on several statuettes from a domestic context (Kaper 2003, 153-54). Temple cult, in general, was thriving in the early Roman period, as various temples were built or extended under the Roman Empire. The main temple of Tutu (Greek Tithoes) at ancient Kellis was built in the first century and rebuilt various times during the second and third century, just as the temple of Deir el-Hagar, six kilometers west of Trimithis, which was built under Nero and extended under Titus and Domitian. Decorations of deities, such as Thoth and Nehmet Away of Trimithis at the temple of Amun-Re at Deir el-Hagar (p. 27, Fig. 20), indicate the close connections between the cities, whose inhabitants presumably came together in a regional festival at Deir el-Hagar (Kaper 1997).

Several features of temple decoration, funerary practices and literary culture have revealed an "archaizing" tendency (Kaper 2012). The

inhabitants of the oasis were less impacted by trends or traditions in the Nile Valley, presumably because of their geographical location. The way Roman emperors' names were depicted on temple walls, the continuation of the traditional Egyptian calendar alongside the Roman calendar, and the reintroduction of inscribed texts on clay tablets and the ba-birds with human head all attest to a cultural independence in which features of the past were highly regarded. This cultural independence stands out most visibly in the large pyramid-shaped structures of the cemetery of Trimithis. There, two mud-brick superstructures stood above mausoleum tombs and were visible from a great distance. Together with similar style pyramids from Mut, these tombs are Roman period revivals of a well-known ancient Egyptian funerary tradition. Together with the previously listed local traditions, they attest to what Kaper calls their "extraordinary independence of mind" (p. 116) by which they navigate between Greco-Roman cultural traditions and these archaizing Egyptian traditions from earlier periods in the Nile Valley.

If traditional Egyptian practices characterized some of the funerary architecture, the connection to the classical traditions of the Greek and Roman world is most visible in wall-paintings, school exercises and personal names. Not all the names in papyri and ostraca are localized or theophoric, but names like Psais, Amun and Tithoes are common. Some of the other personal names are highly Hellenized and refer to classical Greek figures like Peleus (the father of Achilleus), Kleoboulos, Pausanias or Isocrates. This revival of classical Greek names at the end of the third century CE is far more marked in the Great Oasis than elsewhere and shows their attachment to Greek *paideia* (p. 215). In Kellis, this commitment is seen in the school-exercises with Homeric texts (Worp 1997, Worp and Hope 1998, Hope and Worp 2006) and the wooden tablets with orations of the rhetorician Isocrates (Worp and Rijksbaron 1997). At Trimithis, the house

of Serenos and the school next door illustrate this devotion to classical culture. The full colour illustrations of these two fourth-century buildings with their decoration are without a doubt the highlights of this publication (fig. 128-142). The authors deserve to be praised for their decision to include these images in *An Oasis City*. Susanna McFadden's discussion of the decoration shows how the remote location of the oasis did not keep the local elite from appropriating themes from the Greek and Roman world.

What we see in the house of Serenos are panels of painted plaster with elaborate mythological scenes and geometrical decorations, all rather exceptional outside a funerary context. Some of these geometric decorations follow a "wallpaper" design that is also attested in the second century houses of Kellis (Hope and Whitehouse 2006). Other decorative schemes depict themes from Greco-Roman literature: Perseus rescuing Andromeda, Odysseus being recognized by Eurykleia, the Olympian deities witnessing the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares, Orpheus taming the animals, and Zeus seducing Europa. The full-colour pictures of these classical themes are combined with a depiction of "Polis", most probably the personification of Trimithis, which may have been an allusion to the role of the house owner in the city administration (p. 202-5, fig. 140). Susanna McFadden's analysis of the social identity behind the wall paintings ties into Raffaella Cribiore's description of the school-building next to Serenos' house. Identified by its many writing exercises on ostraca, the school is exceptional in having a poetic text, written in red ink, on the walls (Cribiore, Davoli et al. 2008). This *dipinto* consists of five columns of text, framed by the instruction to the students to "imitate" (presumably meaning to copy the text, p. 188).

The domestic setting of many of these findings is further highlighted in a relatively long section on two Roman houses. In their analysis, the House of Serenos (B1) is compared with the older House B2, which was

abandoned about half a century before B1. The comparison between the two structures shows the differentiation in Trimithis' society. Whereas the House of Serenos yielded many texts, objects and classical decorations, House B2 was smaller and only yielded evidence for more mundane activities, like the transportation of agricultural commodities. The one outstanding find in this house was a clay tablet with a Greek economic text (fig. 84). As Kaper (2012) points out elsewhere, writing on clay tablets may have been a specific oasis tradition, as the only other example from the Roman period has been found in Kellis. Unfortunately, these clay tablets are not discussed in *An Oasis City*, while they are at least as fascinating as the pyramid structures discussed in an earlier chapter (p. 112-16). The discussion of House B2 reminds us that the majority of the inhabitants lived in an entirely different world, not characterized by elaborate wall decoration and classical literature.

Christianity

Christianity is widely attested in the Dakhleh Oasis during the fourth century. The central church building at Trimithis has been identified through careful comparison of the architectural structure with the layout of the Large East Church at Kellis and similar designs adopted throughout the region. Aravecchia's discussion of these churches, in particular the church at 'Ain El-Gedida, shows how substantial the contribution of the oasis can be for the study of early Christian church buildings. The most exciting element in the identification of Trimithis's church is the funerary space within the building. Five human interments, without grave goods and all heads placed to the West, were discovered within the church complex. Similar interments inside and close to church buildings have been found

at Deir Abu Metta and the West Church at Kellis (Bowen 2002, 2009). The church at Trimithis surpassed these other buildings by the attestation of a funerary crypt, which could only be entered through the sacristy of the church. Three sealed tombs were found in this vaulted subterranean room, bringing the total number of burials in the church to eight. Other funerary churches with crypts are known, but this crypt in the oasis may have been one of the earliest in Egypt (p. 128-30). In light of this discovery and the subsequent bioarchaeological research, suggestions have been made about the social positions of the individuals buried in the church. Few of these individuals fitted the stereotype of clergy. In Kellis, one of the interments, located in front of the apse, is a six-month-old infant. At Trimithis, the burial closest to the apse is a teenage girl and one of the other interments shows signs of typical military injuries (Aravecchia, Dupras et al. 2015). Could these individuals have been wealthy donors of the church or members of the local elite? Even though not all these examinations are included in *An Oasis City*, they illustrate the potential for further comparative study by scholars of religion.

Ostraca and papyri have yielded abundant evidence for Christianity in Trimithis and the other cities and villages of the oasis (Bagnall and Ruffini 2012). Titles of clergy members and "Christian names" have been attested widely. Fascinating in this respect is a Greek verse on an altar (or the base of a statue) at Trimithis, which reads "great Ammon is the pilot of the life of men" (p. 131). According to Bagnall and Cribiore, this inscription reflects the religious and cultural syncretism of Egypt. Directly above the original hexameter line, an additional Coptic message was written in faint lines, which they identify as the Coptic gloss "*ete pnoute*". Bagnall and Cribiore consider this gloss epigraphical evidence for a type of religious competition in which someone expressed the view that "it is God, *pnoute*, who is the governor of life, not Ammon" (p. 133, their italics). If, on the other hand, this

graffiti was added in the period after the decline of temple cult, it should be examined in the larger context of re-use and appropriation of temples by Christians, which are no longer perceived of as large scale, dramatic and violent episodes (Dijkstra 2015).

Approaching the question of religious entanglement in the oasis in more detail is hampered by the absence of fixed dates for the temple practices and the rise of Christian and Manichaeian communities (see below for Manichaeism). Graffiti and ostraca from the fourth century indicate that the temple was no longer in use, but more than in other sites in the oasis, it is impossible to establish a fixed date for either the demise of the temple cult or the spread of Christianity. The reference to a Christian deacon on an ostrakon from the 350s or 360s CE, found on the temple hill, suggests some non-cultic activity in the second half of the fourth century (Bagnall and Cribiore 2012). In Kellis, the priest of Tutu is still attested in a document from 335 CE, which indicates either the continuation of temple practices into the first half of the fourth century or the persistence of the priestly office in spite of decline (P.Kell.Gr. 13 published in Worp 1995). Christianity must have been flourishing by then since at least two church buildings in Kellis were built before this date (Bowen 2002). Ostraca from the early second half of the fourth century also point to a fourth century date for the churches at Trimithis and 'Ain el-Gedida. Unfortunately they do not tell us anything about the interaction between traditional priests and emerging Christian specialists. Based on onomastic evidence, Gillian Bowen (2003, 2010) has suggested a rapid conversion process, but her evaluation of "Christian names", traced back to the early 250s CE, must be read in the context of more recent discussions on the usage of these names as evidence for "Christianization" (Depauw and Clarysse 2013, Frankfurter 2014, Depauw and Clarysse 2015). These discussions pertaining to what actually counts as a "Christian" name may affect Bowen's reading of the

Kellis onomastics, and thus the proposed date of the rise of Christianity in the oasis.

Local religion and religious interaction: Christians and Manichaeans

One shortcoming of *An Oasis City* is its rather static treatment of late antique religions. Although one cannot expect a full-fledged nuanced approach of religious diversity and change in an archaeological study, the interpretation of this new material would profit from interaction with some of the more recent work on religious diversity. Future publications will have to conceptualize how various “versions” of Christianity co-existed in the cities and villages of the Dakhleh Oasis, and how priests of Egyptian deities like Thoth or Tutu interacted with emerging Christian leaders. It may be too early to ask these questions for Trimithis, but the discovery of Manichaean literature at Kellis shows the extent of the diversity in the oasis (Gardner, Alcock et al. 1999, 2014). I will, therefore, situate the Manichaeans in the oasis and offer some suggestions for interpretations of local religious diversity and interaction.

To start with the trends in the study of religious diversity and interaction, many recent studies focusing on the period of late antiquity have highlighted the variety of religious practices, the blurry boundaries between religious traditions, and the multiplicity of individual engagements. Tabbernee’s (2014) exploration of the contexts of early Christianity illustrates a keen awareness of local differentiation and the steady stream of new material artefacts impinging on the study of these regions. Rüpke’s (2016) approach to “lived ancient religion” shares the focus on differentiation, though mainly as the result of individuals’ strategic or subversive actions by

which they appropriate traditions into their own settings. Many of these alternative approaches question the centrality of the city, and approach ancient religious practice as a personal choice (Kindt 2015), or within a network structure (Harrison 2015). While these programmatic choices do not automatically replace Rome's central position in most reconstructions of ancient religious interactions (Salzman, S  ghy, Testa 2015, R  pke 2016), intra-religious variation between regions and individuals can no longer be glossed over easily (Rebillard 2012, Gordon 2015, Bailey 2016).

One of the areas in which the theoretical focus on blurred group boundaries and religious interaction in the oasis come together is the relation between Christianity and the Manichaeans of Kellis. The Manichaeans are only attested in papyrus documents and inscribed wooden tablets from a small number of Roman houses and do not share in the material evidence for Christianity in architecture, inscriptions, and funerary arrangements. They left no distinct material culture or architecture, but their Coptic and Greek papyri and tablets included Manichaean psalms, canonical scriptures, liturgical texts, as well as a large set of personal letters and business accounts. The owners of the texts must have left them in large storage jars on the roof when the village was abandoned at the end of the fourth century. These documents are strikingly Christian in tone and contain almost no indication of the third century Mesopotamian origin of Manichaeism. This shared vocabulary has led scholars to consider these Manichaeans as "the Christians in the Dakhleh Oasis" (Lieu 1998, 224, his underlining). Indeed, it is true that in the Kellis corpus, the boundaries between the "catholic church" and the "holy church" (their terms) are hard to discern. As there is no indication of which type of Christianity was practiced in the fourth century churches, it remains a question whether Manichaeans could have gathered in these buildings or whether they celebrated their communal ritual meal in one of the excavated houses.

Despite the strong similarity with Christian letters (Choat 2006) and their founder's self-designation as the "Apostle of Jesus Christ" (used for Mani in the Cologne Mani Codex and in one of his Epistles found at Kellis, Gardner 2007a, 35), Manichaeans considered themselves to be the superior "church". Rhetorically, they presented themselves as a new religion surpassing all previous revelations (Lieu 2005, Beduhn 2014). In the context of the oasis, however, this marked distinctiveness seems to have played less of a role, not primarily because of the threat of persecution, but because of the local village setting in which Christians, Manichaeans and others lived in close proximity. Some of the authors stressed their religious affiliation through their usage of explicit Manichaean phrases, but the majority of the letters discuss ordinary events and contain requests for food, garments, or family news. Mostly, these Manichaeans worked with others on the basis of their shared village identity. They participated in legal appeals to the regional and military administration and, at times, made use of Christian officials as scribes and witnesses (as various examples from the Greek papyri have shown, Worp 1995). The strict religious boundaries of their theological texts as well as their fragile legal position seem to have had only minor implications for their relations with neighbours.

These fragmentary traces of religious interaction and the multiplicity of their social affiliations in these letters are best understood within the perspective of lived ancient religion. As Jörg Rüpke has stressed, ancient individuals had a certain amount of agency, despite the totalizing claims made by some of their religious institutions or traditions (Rüpke 2016). The archaeological evidence for local oasis traditions, at odds with the developments in the Nile valley, attests to situations in which wealthy inhabitants of the oasis could appropriate ancient Egyptian traditions as well as Greco-Roman cultural traits in the decoration of their houses, their funerary arrangements, or literary preference. At Kellis, this individual

(or family) agency was visible in the way Manichaeism was put into practice, sometimes in interaction with their itinerant Manichaean holy men (Gardner 2007b, Gardner 2011, Brand 2017, Mirecki 2012), but also without their immediate presence in the oasis (Beduhn 2008). If a village like Kellis knew communities of Christians and Manichaeans, as contemporaries of the Egyptian priests of Tutu, how much more religious variation would have existed in a city like Trimithis?

Two textual passages have been highlighted to shed further light on the religious diversity of the oasis, as both could be interpreted as blending Christianity with Greco-Egyptian religious traditions. One of the epigrams at the school of Trimithis has received special attention because of its reference to (a) 'god' in the singular. The text in the first column is translated as:

... here [I withdraw] near the sources of the sacred leaves. But may god grant my wishes that [you all] learn the Muses' honeyed works, with all the Graces and with Hermes son of Maia reaching the full summit of rhetorical knowledge. Be bold, my boys: the great god will grant you to have a beautiful crown of manifold virtue. (p. 186, their insertions)

Cribiore considers, but rejects, an identification with Hermes Trismegistos, who often carried the epithet "great" and is identified with Thoth, the god of rhetoric as well as the city deity of Trimithis. Instead, she suggests, it "seems very likely that the 'god' is the Christian God" (p. 187). If she is correct, this passage would place the schoolmaster right in the middle of late antique Christian identity politics. Could you be Christian and teach classical literature or Greek mythology? Despite the resistance to this heritage by some early Christian authors, it seems likely that most Christians did not see the problem. Even Tertullian's opposition to

“idolatry” in educational institutions balances the need for education and the rejection of specific classical knowledge and practices (Rebillard 2016). Rebillard’s (2012) framework of multiple identities suggests that Christian teachers, just as all other individuals, could shift from one role (or identity) to another according to the need of the situation. Instead of a blending of traditions, we witness the rhetorical skill of the schoolmaster, who could allude to multiple frames of reference.

A parallel can be drawn with a poetic parody on Homer, found in Kellis, that seems to identify Zeus with the Christian God. Like the Trimithis epigram, this passage is rather ambiguous instead of straightforward. In one of the lines of the poem, Zeus is asked for bread: “Father Zeus, give us bread”. The editors of the text point to the resemblance with the request for bread in the Christian *pater noster* prayer (Hope and Worp 2006, 247). Even though I will not exclude the possibility of such literary crossovers, it is hardly more than a speculation, which sometimes seems to derive from the early twentieth century idea that in some regions alternative versions of Christianity (a polite way of rephrasing “heresy”) predated proto-orthodox traditions (Bauer 1934, refuted in Robinson 1988). Both of these texts from the oasis elude a firm Christian interpretation. Instead, I understand this wall painting and poetic text primarily in terms of socio-cultural status, attesting to the wealth and cultural orientation of the oasis’ elite.

Similar sceptical questions could be raised in returning to the substantial evidence for funerary practices in the oasis. I wonder whether the religious interpretation is always satisfactory. The classification of burials in “pagan” and “Christian” types on the basis of orientation, presence of absence of funerary goods, and the level of mummification (advocated by Bowen 2002), depends on the notion of strictly bounded religious groups, which may have had something to say about funerary customs, something that has been challenged for other regions of the Roman Empire (Rebillard

2009). A full comparative study of the excavated cemeteries at Trimithis, Kellis, Muzzawaka, Deir Abu Metta and at the Kharga Oasis may offer fresh perspectives on changing burial traditions in late antique Egypt, as well as their relation to the customs and ideas of Christians, Manichaeans and others.

Conclusion

While nineteenth century explorers considered the oasis as imperfect and miserable (admittedly, they kept coming back to this fascinating region, Boozer 2013), the recent archaeological and papyrological finds have shown how much the region has to offer. The Dakhleh Oasis informs us about funerary traditions, early Roman temple construction, extensive and colourful decorations with classical religious themes, early Church buildings and the everyday life of Manichaeans. The local diversity of the region is visible in their decorative choices, the remarkable pyramid structures, and clay tablets, all features in which they showed creative local agency instead of slavishly following the mainstream traditions of the Nile Valley. The evidence for Manichaeans, living alongside “Catholic” Christians and worshipers of Tutu, shows that there was room for religious differences in the everyday life of villages and cities of the oasis.

As a report on ongoing excavations, *An Oasis City* is informative, stimulating, and accessible for non-specialists. The authors must be praised for their courage to bring preliminary results of an ongoing excavation to the public. The project’s website (www.amheida.org), moreover, must be mentioned as providing access to all field reports, maps, and even a digital database of all finds. The downside of the broad scope of this book is the brevity of analysis. The preliminary results of the excavations often lead

to new questions and thus call for further examination and discussion. For some readers, therefore, this volume may have been published too early, but there is much to be learned nevertheless. Scholars as well as students interested in late antique religions will find in this book an excellent introduction to a less known region which, despite its location, was very much connected to the religious developments of the later Roman Empire.

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was financially supported by Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) as part of the project "Manichaeans and others in fourth-century Egypt: The mechanisms of religious change in Late Antiquity". I am grateful for the feedback of A.F. de Jong, and I would like to thank Colin A. Hope, Gillian Bowen, Nicola Aravecchia and Olaf E. Kaper for our conversations about the oasis, some of which took place during my research stay at Macquarie University.

Reference List

- Aravecchia, N., T. L. Dupras, D. Dzierzbicka, and L. Williams. 2015. "The church at Trimithis (ancient Trimithis) in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt: A bioarchaeological perspective on an Early Christian mortuary complex." *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* 9: 21-43.
- Bagnall, R. S., and R. Cribiore. 2012. "Christianity on Thoth's Hill." In *The Oasis Papers* 6, edited by R. S. Bagnall, P. Davoli, and C. A. Hope, 409-15. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

- Bagnall, R. S., and G. Ruffini. 2012. *Trimithis I. Ostraka from Trimithis*, Volume 1. New York: New York University Press.
- Bagnall, R. S., N. Aravecchia, R. Cribiore, P. Davoli, O. E. Kaper, and S. McFadden, eds. 2015. *An Oasis City*. New York: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University Press.
- Bailey, L. K. 2016. *The Religious Worlds of the Laity in Late Antique Gaul*. London: Bloomsbury Press.
- Bauer, W. 1934. *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- BeDuhn, J. D. 2008. "The Domestic Setting of Manichaean Cultic Associations in Roman Late Antiquity." *Archive für Religionsgeschichte* 10: 259-71.
- BeDuhn, J. D. 2014. "Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of 'Religion' in Third Century Iran." In *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, edited by I. Gardner, J. D. BeDuhn, and P. Dilley, 247-75. Leiden: Brill.
- Boozer, A. L. 2013. "Archaeology on Egypt's Edge: Archaeological Research in the Dakhleh Oasis, 1819-1977." *Ancient West & East* 12: 117-56.
- Bowen, G. E. 2002. "The Fourth-Century Churches at Ismant el-Kharab." In *Dakhleh Oasis Project: Preliminary Reports on the 1994-1995 to 1998-1999 Field Seasons*, edited by C. A. Hope and G. E. Bowen, 65-85. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Bowen, G. E. 2003. "Some observations on Christian burial practices at Kellis." In *The Oasis Papers* 3, edited by G. E. Bowen and C. A. Hope, 167-82. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Bowen, G. E. 2009. "The Church of Deir Abu Metta, Dakhleh Oasis: A Report on the 2009 Excavation." *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology* 20: 7-36.

- Bowen, G. E. 2010. "The spread of Christianity in Egypt: Archaeological evidence from Dakhleh and Kharga oases." In *Egyptian Culture and Society: Studies in Honour of Naguib Kanawati*, edited by A. Woods, A. McFarlane, and S. Binder, 15-29. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Brand, M. 2017. "Speech Patterns as Indicators of Religious Identities: The Manichaean Community in Late Antique Egypt." In *Sinews of Empire: Networks in the Roman near East and Beyond*, edited by H. F. Teigen and E. Heldaas Seland, 105-19. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Choat, M. 2006. *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Cribiore, R., P. Davoli, and D. M. Ratzan. 2008. "A Teacher's Dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis)." *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 21: 179-91.
- Depauw, M., and W. Clarysse. 2013. "How Christian was fourth century Egypt? Onomastic perspectives on conversion." *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (4): 407-35.
- Depauw, M., and W. Clarysse. 2015. "Christian Onomastics: A response to Frankfurter." *Vigiliae Christianae* 69 (3): 327-29.
- Dijkstra, J. H. F. 2015. "Religious Violence in Late Antique Egypt Reconsidered: The Cases of Alexandria, Panopolis and Philae." *Journal of Early Christian History* 5 (2): 24-48.
- Frankfurter, D. 2014. "Onomastic statistics and the Christianization of Egypt: A response to Depauw and Clarysse." *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (3): 284-89.
- Gardner, I., ed. 2007a. *Kellis Literary Texts*. Volume 2. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

- Gardner, I. 2007b. "P. Kellis I 67 Revisited." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 159: 223-28.
- Gardner, I. 2011. "Manichaean ritual practice at ancient Kellis: A new understanding of the meaning and function of the so-called Prayer of the Emanations." In *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and Other Gnosticism*, edited by J.A. van den Berg, A. Kotze, T. Nicklas and M. Scopello, 245-62. Leiden, Brill.
- Gardner, I., A. Alcock, and W. P. Funk, eds. 1999. *Coptic documentary texts from Kellis*. Volume 1. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Gardner, I., A. Alcock, and W. P. Funk, eds. 2014. *Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis*. Volume 2. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Gordon, R. L. 2015. "Religious Competence and Individuality: Three Studies in the Roman Empire." *Religion* 45 (3): 367-85.
- Harrison, T. 2015. "Review Article: Beyond the Polis? New approaches to Greek Religion." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135: 165-80.
- Hope, C. A., and H. Whitehouse. 2006. "A Painted Residence at Ismant el-Kharab (Kellis) in the Dakhleh Oasis." *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 19: 312-28.
- Hope, C. A., and Worp, K. A. 2006. "Miniature codices from Kellis." *Mnemosyne* 59: 226-258.
- Kaper, O. E. 1997. "Temples and Gods in Roman Dakhleh: Studies in the Indigenous Cults of an Egyptian Oasis". Unpublished PhD dissertation, Groningen University.
- Kaper, O. E. 2003. *The Egyptian God Tutu: A study of the Sphinx-God and Master of Demons with a corpus of monuments*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Kaper, O. E. 2012. "The Western Oases". In *The Oxford handbook to Roman Egypt*, edited by C. Riggs, 717-35. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kindt, J. 2015. "Personal Religion: A productive category for the study of ancient Greek Religion?" *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135: 35-50.
- Lieu, S. N. C. 1998. "The Self-Identity of the Manichaeans in the Roman East." *Mediterranean Archeology* 11: 205-27.
- Lieu, S. N. C. 2005. "'My Church Is Superior...' Mani's missionary statement in Coptic and Middle Persian." In *Coptica - Gnostica - Manichaica: Mélanges Offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk*, edited by P. H. Poirier and L. Painchaud, 519-27. Québec Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Mirecki, P. A. 2012. "Manichaeism, Scribal Magic and Papyrus Kellis 35." In *Gnostica Et Manichaica*, edited by L. Cirillo and M. Knuppel, 133-46. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Rebillard, E. 2009. *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Rebillard, E. 2012. *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Rebillard, E. 2016. "Everyday Christianity in Carthage at the Time of Tertullian." *Religion in the Roman Empire* 2 (1): 91-102.
- Robinson, Th. A. 1988. *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church*. Queenstown, Ont.: Edwin Mellen.
- Rüpke, J. 2016. *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Salzman, M., M. Sághy, and R. L. Testa, eds. 2015. *Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tabbernee, W., ed. 2014. *Early Christianity in Contexts: Exploration across cultures and continents*. Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic.
- Thompson, J. 1992. *Sir Gardner Wilkinson and his circle*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- Worp, K. A., ed. 1995. *Greek papyri from Kellis I*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Worp, K. A. 1997. "A New Wooden Board from the Temple at Kellis." *Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete* 3: 1014-20.
- Worp, K. A., and C. A. Hope. 1998. „A New Fragment of Homer." *Mnemosyne* 51: 206-210.
- Worp, K. A., and A. Rijksbaron, eds. 1997. *The Kellis Isocrates Codex*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.